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NEWSLETTER
Ross Douthat

There's a Simpler Explanation for the Rightward Shift of Young Men

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Why are young conservatives so radicalized? Why is there such a stark generation gap, something you hear about any time you talk to any Republican of any prominence, between the basically optimistic assumptions of late-middle-aged conservatives and the black-pilled doomers born after the Reagan era?

There are a lot of stories you can tell here. The young conservatives are mostly men, so you can talk about male struggles in a postindustrial economy or how the polarization of men and women makes sexual frustration an engine of radicalization. Young conservatives are also very online, so you can blame tech oligarchs and their algorithms or just cast the internet writ large as an engine of pessimism. You can blame President Trump, postliberal philosophers, racist podcasters. You can fold young male disillusionment into much bigger stories — the crisis of post-Cold War liberalism, the era of bad economic feels that Covid ushered in, the sense of human obsolescence under digital conditions.

Regular readers of this newsletter know that I am partial to several of these arguments. But sometimes a narrower and more purely material analysis is helpful. For about a decade, under woke and racial-reckoning conditions, certain important American institutions appeared to systematically disfavor younger white men for employment, preferment and advancement. In the process, these institutions forged a cohort that had concrete, economic, material reasons to regard the existing system and its values as a racially motivated conspiracy against their interests.

The rightward shift, the black pill, the extremism, the hard turn against all forms of immigration, the strange appeal of Nick Fuentes — in this reading it's not primarily about new technology or postliberal ideas or some kind of cultural recoil from woke conformity.

It's about jobs, professional opportunity and feeling like a door has been slammed in your face or closed before you ever reach it.

The material experience of apparent anti-white discrimination is the subject of Jacob Savage's new essay for Compact magazine, "The Lost Generation," which I recommend to all readers, especially anyone who believes that the woke era was exclusively defined by vaporous ideological rhetoric and tedious propaganda sessions that had little practical effect. Savage argues that the effects of the diversity, equity and inclusion era were eminently material and practical: Across a wide range of elite professions, from academia to journalism to entertainment, the new system significantly changed who was hired and promoted by seemingly discriminating against younger white men.

The "young" part is crucial because, as Savage emphasizes, the older white men in charge of these institutions mostly kept their jobs. There were occasional coups, but white male leaders in their 40s, 50s or 60s didn't all hand power to women and minorities. Instead they embraced the moral claims of wokeness and made sure that the employment effects fell on the rising generation instead of on them.

A correction was made on Dec. 17, 2025*: An earlier version of this newsletter, relying on an inaccurate claim in an essay, misstated the number of white American men born after 1984 who had published a work of literary fiction in The New Yorker. It is at least one, not zero. An earlier version of this correction misstated the essayist's given name. He is Jacob Savage, not John.*

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. Learn more

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